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ABSTRACT

A case study of a language confused, bilingual, educable mentally retarded child is presented to illustrate the array of factors involved in teaching limited English proficient exceptional children. A brief summary and list of recommendations by the psychologist note the child's social, economic, and cultural background. Pinpointed are the student's lack of knowledge of syntactic rules and vocabulary in both languages, unavailability of appropriate materials in the schools, and her need for opportunities to separate her language more systematically. A language experience program was initiated in which the class worked only in Spanish in the morning and only in English in the afternoon. A followup report indicates outstanding social growth, average intelligence, and improved academic performance. (CL)

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ONE APPROACH IN TEACHING THE SPECIAL EDUCATION CHILD

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Data reported by the California State Board of Education (1979) suggests that Hispanic children continue to be over-represented in Educational Mentally Retarded (EMR) or Learning Disability (LD) classrooms. This suggests that there has been very little done by school districts to develop curricula for the handicapped bilingual children. In a recent research project (1982), a survey of 710 nationwide districts requesting information regarding bilingual curricula showed that 52 (7%) were in various stages of developing materials and 24 (3%) had the finished product. Upon further analysis of the 24 documents, most of these materials were supplemented to a mainstream language arts or reading continuum. This means that the special education teacher usually does not have relevant materials to use with the bilingual handicapped child in the primary language.

Most Hispanic children ultimately placed in EMR or learning disability classrooms have usually been in the school system four to five years. Low levels of academic performance are not clearly evident in the lower elementary grades, particularly if a child is non-English speaking at the kindergarten level.

It is usually in the time period between the fourth and sixth grades, that the child is performing significantly worse than his peers in the basic skills areas. It has also become a behavior problem when he/she is

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finally evaluated for possible placement in a special education class. By this time, the child has sufficient English language skills for the special education teacher to assume English only instructions. As a former bilingual special education teacher, I believe that this assumption is correct.

Let us examine an actual case of a mentally retarded, language confused, bilingual child who has gone through the type of experience previously discussed. A few years ago I taught Elizabeth as a fourth through sixth EMR elementary school teacher. Elizabeth was ten years old when she came to the EMR class and was reading at the 1.5 grade level. Her math skills were at the 2.1 grade level.

The following is the report submitted by the district psychologist upon the conclusion of a meeting with the Assistant Superintendent in charge of special programs, the school nurse, the principal, the recommending teacher, and the special education teacher. All unanimously favored placing the child in an EMR class.

Name: Elizabeth Grade: Fourth

Birth Date: 11-12-64 Age: 10 years Test Date: 11-05-74

Brief Summary and Recommendations

Elizabeth is a child of below average intelligence. WISC-R full, cale I.Q. is 71. She is experiencing difficulty in school achievement and social adjustment. The principal causative factors for this difficulty include: low academic potential and developmental lags in those areas required for reading, writing, and math; distractability, and very poor memory skills. Additional individual remediation will be needed in the areas of reading, writing, and math. Medical, hearing, vision, and neurological examinations are indicated. Individual assistance with the English language is indicated;

the ESL program would be helpful. Significant learning disabilities will require a specialized curriculum. EMR class placement is recommended for consideration. Elizabeth is a marginal candidate for special placement.

Statement of the Problem

Elizabeth was referred for a general assessment of mental abilities, overall developmental level, and social adjustment. She has experienced difficulty in all areas of academic achievement and social growth. She requires considerable attention, and is often disruptive in class.

Social, Economic and Cultural Background

Elizabeth lives with her mother and father. She has one brother who is six years old and three sisters who are 6 years, 1 year, and five months. Interpersonal relationships between Elizabeth and her family are described as close with the mother, but distant with the father. The mother and father are currently unemployed. The economic status of the family is described as poor. The family is presently being assisted by welfare. English and Spanish are spoken in the home.

As is evident, Elizabeth fits the classic pattern. She had been in the school district four years when she finally was evaluated and placed in a mentally retarded class. Her language was English and Spanish, and she was two to three years behind in math and reading. She had become disruptive before finally being referred.

Elizabeth is commuting between two cultures, and has parents who mix their languages. This does not allow her to develop each one separately. She has not developed sufficient vocabulary and consequent concepts in either language to make sense of the academic tasks required. This problem may be compounded by the possibility that the parents may be illiterate or uneducated as well. Because of the low socieconomic status indicated,

she has not had the necessary home experience to make sense of the curricular tasks.

A Problem Case

According to Cummins (1970) a child must reach a threshold of competence in the native language before any L2 can be mastered. He also alludes to several investigators drawing attention to the fact that some bilingual children who have been exposed to both languages in an unsystematic fashion prior to school, come to school with less than native like command of the vocabulary and syntactic structures of both L1 and L2 (Gonzalez, 1979, Kaminsky, 1976). Gonzalez (1979) suggests that under these conditions children may switch codes because they do not know the label for a particular concept in the language they are speaking, but have it readily available in the other language. Because the languages are not separated, each acts as a crutch for the other with the result that the children may fail to develop full proficiency in either language. Kaminsky (1976) has argued that these bilingual children may fail to develop fluent reading skills, since their knowledge of syntactic rules and vocabulary of each language may be insufficient to make accurate predictions regarding the information in the text.

The content and activities in the traditional curriculum of an elementary school does not provide materials for a child like Elizabeth. She could not identify with many of the experiences illustrated in her books, and could not find experiences in her background enabling her to generalize the tasks required. According to Bloom and Lahey (1978), if the language addressed to a child does not make sense relative to what the child knows, then it does not make any sense at all to the child. Such speech could not be a model for learning. The same thing might be said of the reading

continuum that Elizabeth had been studying for four years. Bloom and Lahey also say that language disorder refers to any disruption in the learning of a native language. The use of English in an unsystematic fashion in the home, and using content that made no sense relative to what she knew in the school system, could have caused the language disorder and disruption in the learning language.

Language involves interactions among content, form, and use. Normal language development according to Bloom and Lahey (1978) has been described as the successful interaction among the three. Content is the ideas expressed, semantics; form is the correct or incorrect arrangement of the words, syntax; and use is the functional expression of the ideas, pragmatics.

However, the different ways in which these components can interact with each other can result in disorders of form, content, or use. For example, disorder of form would mean that that children's ideas about the world and abilities to communicate these ideas are more intact than their knowledge of the linguistic system for representing and communicating these ideas. For example, when Elizabeth would go to Mexicali, Mexico (Baja California), to visit her grandparents, she would come back to school to relate detail and sequence of events that were quite sophisticated. The grandparents in Mexico could not speak English, so everything the child saw and did was in one language. However, Elizabeth knew more than she could relate because of her limited proficiency in each language.

In English, Elizabeth produced a disorder of use. According to Bloom and Lahey (1978), when children are learning the system to encode, ideas appears to be less of a problem than using the system for communication. During her four years in the public school, Elizabeth committed to memory many of the forms and content in English, but she would not use them consistently or

correctly. For example, names of cities, states, and countries were used interchangeably, the concept of direction was confused; sometimes north became south, east or west; measurements of distance such as feet, inches, or miles were used in description with no consistency or correctness (a room in her description could become four miles by five miles in length and width).

It became evident that Elizabeth needed to be given the opportunity to separate her language more systematically. The school system had immersed her in English from her first day in kindergarten. However, the majority of her experiences, concepts, and vocabulary were in Spanish. The results was that she had become English dominant, but with language disorders. She mixed the languages for certain uses, mostly for describing activities that related to the home and community. A conference with the parents revealed that they, indeed, did mix the languages. Their language at home was syntactically and semantically in Spanish, with a significant borrowing of the English lexicon.

Because the only pure language experiences the child had were in Mexico, it was decided to develop her Spanish systematically, using the language experience approach. Stories about her grandmother's house were developed for her to read. These included topics of Mexicali, the town she lived in, her games, friends, and dreams. During the morning hours, we would work only in Spanish and in the afternoon only in English. The classroom was entirely Mexican American, so all of the children had similar problems. This language experience approach also made it easier to structure the content and language medium of instruction. The effects of Spanish development on Elizabeth's English were quite exciting. She began to ask about capitalization, periods, paragraphs, etc., things she was never interested in before. Her descriptions became more precise and detailed toward the end of the year. Following is a

modified report of the psychological evaluation on Elizabeth by the same psychologist after six months of developing her communication and academic skills in her native language.

Name: Elizabeth Grade: 4 EMR

Birth Date: 11-11-63 Test Date: 5-22-75

Statement of Problem

Elizabeth was referred for reassessment of mental abilities, developmental level, and personal adjustment. She was last tested 11-05-74. The special class teacher felt significant growth has occurred since her last placement, and she may now qualify for regular class placement. Her Social growth has been outstanding.

BRIEF SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Elizabeth is a child of average intelligence. WISC-R full scale IQ is 80. The auditory attention span is moderately depressed, and auditory stimuli must be presented in short sequences. Individual remediation continues to be needed in the areas of reading, writing, and math. Reading instruction should be set at the 3.4 grade level, and should employ appropriate age interest materials. Math instruction should be set at the 3.4 grade level, and should emphasize the development of basic skills. Individual assistance with English is indicated. A therapeutic supportive approach continues to be needed. She shows significant improvement in previous learning deficiencies. Educationally Handicapped class placement may be a viable option at this time. Very careful monitoring of performance will be important.

EDUCATIONAL HISTORY

Elizabeth is currently assigned to the EMR program. Academic achievement has been outstanding in this program. School attendance has been good. The current overall school adjustment is considered to be above average.

TEST RESULTS:

Tests previously administered include: WISC, Bender-Testalt, Goodenough D.A.P. These tests were administered on the following date: 11-05-74. Significant observation included I.Q. 71.

The question of whether Elizabeth would function at an EMR range, if she was exposed to only one language both in and out of school, is meaningless. The facts are that she does function at a low academic level, and there are two languages in her life, which left her developmentally delayed and confused. The third fact is that there are many Elizabeths in our school districts who are functionally retarded with respect to their school performance. Elizabeth was not the only child in that class who showed significant growth in English after having formally developed competencies (reading) in her first language. An instructional approach depending solely on the experiences of the child, and in the language which has formed the base of their mental manipulations, would only seem to make sense.

By definition, Elizabeth does not belong in a bilingual classroom. She was at that time English dominant, however, far from being English proficient. Her first and primary language experience was in Spanish, and it was worthwhile to go back and tap this wealth of knowledge. Having to deal with two languages disrupted the normal development of the language, which had the consequence of developmental delay, confusion and anger, as shown by her disruptive behavior. Disentangling the occurence and use of the two languages, led to significant improvement in Elizabeth's academic performance and social behavior.

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